

The Outdoor Recreation Experience: Factors Affecting Participation of African American Women

by Nina S. Roberts and Ellen B. Drogin

All individuals inherently search for ways by which to improve the quality of their lives. Recreational activities, specifically those in the outdoors (e.g., biking, hiking, fishing, camping, skiing, canoeing, wildlife viewing, and the like), are an important means by which individuals attain satisfaction thereby improving the quality of life. Although an increasing number of women are enjoying the outdoors and participating in outdoor activities, the representation of black women among them is relatively low. What are the factors contributing to the non-participation of African American women in outdoor recreation activities?

In order to address this question, relevant research was synthesized and interviews were conducted with African American women in the Washington D.C. area regarding their thoughts, feelings, and insights on the subject of outdoor recreation participation and non-participation. Acknowledgment of cultural diversity among women mandates that women of color be looked at as a group that may indeed pursue different goals, and subsequently, engage in different activities toward meeting these goals.

The voices of those interviewed are limited. However, if experiential education is to address the growing and altering needs of all individuals, the comments of those interviewed should be taken as illustrative of the imperative to investigate reasons for non-participation by individuals of varied ethnic backgrounds. The non-participation of African American women in outdoor recreation can be viewed in the

contexts of: historical oppression and racism; stereotyping by race and gender; lack of role models; insufficient exposure to activity options; limited accessibility to outdoor recreation areas; and oppressive economic conditions.

Historical Perspective

The uniqueness of outdoor adventure experiences for women, in general, has been explored and well documented (LaBastille, 1980; Miranda & Yerkes, 1982; Warren, 1985; Bialeschki, 1992). These historical perspectives indicate that women have traveled adventurously for years, yet social barriers and gender roles have limited many women from attaining a quality experience in outdoor-adventure activities. Understanding what the nature of black women's experience has been with respect to outdoor adventure is a difficult task.

There has historically been an emphasis on representation of blackness that supports and maintains a sense of oppression, exploitation, and overall domination of black people (Hooks, 1992). For instance, oppression is driven by the belief that because skin color is different or individuals simply "look" different, then that, in itself, makes their lives different. If life for women of color is different, then their experiences (including outdoor pursuits) are going to be different. Just how different are the needs of women of color? Even today, more than twenty years after the onset of the Civil Rights movement, "which served to enlighten the dominant culture," many black women

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Nina S. Roberts, M.A., is a woman of color who recently received her master's degree from the University of Maryland at College Park. She is currently a Research Assistant with the National Public Services Research Institute in Landover, MD.

Ellen B. Drogin, Ph.D., is currently a faculty member in the Department of Recreation at the University of Maryland-College Park. Her research interests include: research methodology, computer applications in leisure services, outdoor recreation and behavior, and visitor impact management.

(in particular) continue to suffer from a negative self-image (Boyd, 1990). "The woman of color's self-image, her confidence (or lack of it), as well as her perceptions of the world around her have evolved out of her personal experiences. Many of these experiences are rooted in myths and stereotypes surrounding her ethnic and cultural heritage and gender" (Boyd, p. 151).

Perceptions of Race and Gender

Are there any ingredients manifest in diverse cultural backgrounds which have an effect or alter the outdoor experience? Chavez (as reported in Henderson & Bedini, 1992) explored diversity among various ethnic groups. In her studies she found that outdoor activities and those factors which affect the quality of the experience do not vary significantly by group; activities are enjoyed and appreciated equally. The most significant difference reported between ethnic groups was "perceived exposure to discriminatory acts." Individuals with a minority background were more likely to believe that they may be further imperiled by these acts. Recommendations were directed to resource managers and incorporated "suggestions for interaction and communication" with the visitors.

Zelda Lockhart, a graduate student of English literature, poet, and former president of the Board of Directors of the Women's Wilderness Network says, "I do not think that black women are not aware of outdoor activities; it's just that black women may think it's a white thing. They seem to be socialized to believe that participating in outdoor adventure is a white person's thing to do; it's not a white thing, it's a life thing."

In order to survive, women of color have become masters in the art of being bicultural. Smith (1983), in her article *Some Thoughts on Racism*, writes "there is a lot of propaganda in this culture for the normality of the rightness of whiteness" (p. 27). According to Smith, generations of exposure to the socially accepted norms of "whiteness" have made it virtually impossible for women of color not to adopt specific behaviors (i.e., standards of beauty, language, and mannerisms associated with white culture that would allow them to survive). It is still apparent that what is known about women pursuing outdoor adventures comes primarily from studies of white women; the interests and experiences of women of color need further exploration (Freysinger, 1990; Roberts, 1992).

Women of color are learning that a valuable benefit of outdoor experiences is the opportunity for spiritual enrichment and growth. A connection can be made with their own lives because, for many women of color, establishing a sense of identity through rituals and traditional customs is important in developing a "stronger sense of self individually and collectively" (Boyd, 1990).

The leisure service professionals and outdoor edu-

cators of tomorrow will have to effectively translate culture into leisure and perform the role of facilitator in order to truly meet the needs of diverse cultures. In order to have dignity in difference, professionals must have an understanding of and established place within the community, before reaching out to community members (Colston, 1991). Leaders must convey that outdoor recreation experiences may occur in a variety of outdoor settings, from city parks to pristine wilderness. The opportunity for spiritual experiences, particularly in terms of solitude, as a part of outdoor activities may largely depend on the natural attributes of these environments. The quality and naturalness of the environment, including physical attributes, may have an influence on the type and intensity of emotional and psychological experience of each woman.

Lack of Role Models

Professionals need to bridge the gap between the ideal of wilderness activities available for all and the reality of stereotypes that convey the outdoors as a white privilege. The discrepancy can be a problem if not handled properly:

If groups and individuals are more sensitive to cultural differences, then women of color will be attracted to the outdoors on a more positive level. Other stereotypes such as perceptions of racial tension, although very real, are exaggerated. If black women really want to try these activities they will. (Kathy Billingslea)

The cultural aspect plays a role, but for the most part black women must deal with these actively or place stereotypes internally:

I don't pay any attention to color differences. It's being with women and enjoying the experience that matters. If the need were real and actual then the need would be met, but if the need were to provide for a stigma or cultural stereotype, the need would not be met. It bothers me to hear other black women saying 'they' aren't providing for us. Who is 'they'? White women or wilderness/outdoor organizations? (Zelda Lockhart)

Other black individuals often pave the way for black women who need to have someone else "do it first." Similarly, Diane believes that most black women do not look to or search for adventure in their lives:

There is a need for encouragement from other women of color who have done such activities (i.e., adventure-based) to aggressively encourage these women to try certain outdoor pursuits, possibly sparking their interest. African American women need to feel they are not the only black person participating. On the other hand, they must have a more positive attitude of self; outdoor activities are very individual.

Diane tells about her recent purchase of a new bike. "I know I must do for myself. Although most of my friends don't have bikes I learned that it's o.k. to be an individual, and biking is something I really enjoy." Although she's never participated in more "risk-taking" activities, she wants to try rock climbing and white-water rafting someday. Diane continues: "There is a stereotype of wanting to be with other people of color; not being around others of similar cultures is an uncomfortable feeling for some people."

Boyd (1990) recognizes that although there are women of color who may not look to their ethnic traditions for subsistence, it is very likely on some level many women of color will seek a source of comfort and/or nurturing that only her family or community can provide (p. 159).

"Adventure activities make you brave no matter what your level. Outdoor successes make you feel strong and courageous. They make you reach out of your everyday life, and expand your day to day routine" (Zelda Lockhart). Zelda asserts that having black women as leaders would be a recognizable means of connecting other black women with the experiences and opportunities of outdoor activities. Denise Mitten, Executive Director of Woodswomen (Minneapolis) affirms:

as part of our guide network, our recruiting aspect will work to include women of color in the Leadership Training. This in turn will increase the role models for ethnically diverse women who participate, and conceivably increase involvement of women of color as a whole.

Lesley, a Computer Analyst, states in terms of increasing involvement of black women in general, "attracting more women of color on a social basis may be a factor." Similarly Diane suggests that "advertising and marketing do not use black women in photographs or commercials, and this hurts the promotion of outdoor activities." The publication of outdoor related magazines and brochures is often very discriminatory (textually and graphically). A change is necessary to fairly represent that the outdoors is a place for all people.

Lack of Exposure

"Black women don't get any push or motivational force in this direction," says Pam Rigby, 33, a Research Assistant. "It's not so much that black women have a lack of interest, but since we don't get exposure to these activities growing up, we are not as aware of the opportunities. Black women use different methods to release stress and enjoy themselves. They need exposure to the outdoors to see it as an alternative." Pam enjoys hiking, traveling, and photography. Although she doesn't participate that often in outdoor activities, Pam would love to try white-water rafting where

everyone paddles. "I like the idea of excitement and challenge in a more controlled activity; in addition, I like having a guide in the raft because if I lose control someone is there to take over!"

Through outdoor experiences, women of color can enhance their pride in themselves as individuals and as women. For African American women, in particular, society has indicated that lighter skin makes one more worthy and valuable in the eyes of others (Hooks, 1992). Despite efforts to educate African Americans in an affirming black context, they may internalize white "aesthetic" values, "a way of looking and seeing the world" that negates their value as black individuals (p. 3). Increased exposure to outdoor recreation/adventure activities can enhance self-confidence. Self-confidence is an admired trait. Life goes on outside the neighborhood and beyond the family; self-confidence is one springboard to personal richness.

Kathy Billingslea grew up in West Point, Georgia. She feels, as does Pam, that many black women are unaware of outdoor and adventure activities. When asked about some of the ways in which black women might become involved, their responses were similar. "Because of the continued perception of racial stereotypes, women of color will be more likely to participate through sponsorship of a minority group or social club or other support system" (Kathy Billingslea). Similarly, Pam believes that one method of reaching out would be to introduce the outdoors to an organized group and begin with low key activities (e.g., easy hiking vs. backpacking, lake canoeing vs. white-water rafting). "Make all possible options and opportunities available—don't push, but encourage gently. Black women need to know outdoor activities are not threatening and can be facilitated to enhance positive experiences. It would do more damage than good to have a bad experience."

Kathy was a Physical Education major in college when she lived in the south, and as an avid outdoor enthusiast she says it was easier to participate in adventure activities because she knew people with the same interests. "I find that as I've traveled (and now live) further north on the east coast, people don't know how to relax. Being in the outdoors is often real time for me. It helps me realize whether I am able to spend time with myself. I can determine whether I am at peace with myself, where I am in life. People grow accustomed to a city lifestyle and just don't enjoy the benefits of a secluded natural environment."

Accessing Wilderness From Urban Areas

The opportunities to participate in leisure activities or experiential programs were once limited (and for many still are) to the geographic boundaries of the urban environment. Once women of color experience an activity in the outdoors, the desire and subsequent

opportunity for increased participation may be enhanced. We cannot expect women from inner cities, who have had only minimal exposure to outdoor areas through the media, to feel good about adventuring beyond their personal/familiar environment unless there is sufficient time to interact with other areas, develop an enjoyable relationship with the outdoors, and want to explore.

"If black women are not in a double income family, participation in outdoor programs becomes even more difficult. Moreover, for those black women living in the inner city without personal means of transportation, their 'activity world' is often restricted or bounded by public transportation routes. If these women are aware of activities happening in the suburbs or the wilderness, many must rely on friends for transportation and may not ask" (Kathy Billingslea).

Economic Conditions

Economic conditions affect everyone; however, the degree of effect varies significantly. Economics is frequently noted as a barrier or constraint to outdoor recreation participation. Research shows that women of color bear more economic burdens than any other group in this country: *maintaining single-parent households* (i.e., 44% of black women, 23% of Hispanic women, 23% of Native American women, 13% of white women); *heading households living in poverty* (i.e., 52% of black households, 53% of Hispanic households, and 27% of white households); and, *supporting large families of four or more* (i.e., 40% of black women, 60% of Hispanic women, 20% of white women) (Hurtado, 1989). In addition, teenage mothers are more likely to be black (58% black, 13% white). "White women also suffer economically, but their economic situation is not as dire as that of women of color" (p. 837).

Of course, there is a population of black women who live within solid financial means and can well afford participation in a variety of recreational activities. Over the past twenty years, new class divisions within the black community have emerged. Most women (including African American women) assume that all black women share the same material and social interests; this must be re-examined (Albrecht & Brewer, 1990). Many middle class black women are no longer rooted within the culture of a black working class community. How exactly does class structure fit into participation in the outdoors? Are black women who are more self-sufficient more likely to participate in a canoe expedition or hiking adventure, for

instance, than those having less income? A lack of economic means, however, does not completely explain the disproportionately small number of black women choosing involvement in adventure activities. For the woman engaged in outdoor adventure pursuits, there is an opportunity to gain a more intimate view of one's strengths, weaknesses, and character. The outdoors provides an experience that no amount of money could ever buy.

Denise Mitten (Director of Woodswomen) states that during the first year of their Women and Kids program (canoeing, camping and rock climbing), about 85 percent of their participants were comprised of African Americans, Hispanics, or Native Americans. "A large factor in the success of this program is the effective and valuable outreach to families who are socially and economically disadvantaged," affirms Mitten; "unfortunately, during our second year, this diverse participation decreased to about 50 percent as our budget did not allow for the same pace and level of outreach as we would have liked" (Personal communication, October 1991).

Conclusion

Ethnic and cultural differences cannot be ignored. In general, women of color have been largely under-represented in leisure research in the wilderness, in part because of their predominantly urban residence, and the failure to account for these individuals in national or state surveys and in interviews in sufficient numbers for detailed statistical and behavioral analysis (Hutchison, 1988). Primarily the criticisms for lack of emphasis are because of methodological concerns. Hutchison explains that more important, and more damaging, is the fact that contemporary leisure research has bypassed blacks and other minority populations in the United States because of a lack of specificity given to definitions of "race" and "ethnicity"; the lack of published research in race and ethnic relations; and the lack of attention given to the activities of other ethnic groups (p. 16).

Understanding participation levels and leisure patterns of black women in the outdoors is difficult. Planning initiatives to reduce barriers for women of color on the part of outdoor recreation and experiential education professionals must be undertaken to comprehend and overcome, if appropriate, unique constraints to participation faced by black women. The outdoors has become a vital force in the lives of millions of people and increasing opportunities for people of color will call for cooperation and communication between individuals, community groups, and public

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and private agencies.

Black women have expressed intrinsic satisfaction and quality experiences from outdoor participation. There is a sense of personal freedom that can be acquired from the out-of-doors which all women regardless of ethnicity can experience and share. There are a great many outdoor adventures which can be undertaken at very little cost. Economically, options for participation exist. Diverse role models must be identified to encourage and educate those willing, yet hesitant to participate. These models should serve to facilitate and strengthen the unique differences among women of color. Women of color look for a source of comfort and/or nurturing that only their community can offer. The community can then be strengthened and enriched by these participants gaining and, in turn, passing on the benefits of outdoor pursuits. The outdoors provides a rich assortment of possibilities that may not be discovered without some degree of knowledge and risk.

It is only with the passage of time coupled with a gradual acceptance and understanding by society that women have more fully experienced the opportunities and benefits of outdoor pursuits (Bialeschski, 1992). For African American women, the issue is to live beyond the societal and self-imposed boundaries and constraints to participation in the outdoors. From what experiential perspective do black women dream, look, create, and take action? For those who dare to escape the conventional "black urban environments," the issue becomes more than simply moving beyond social barriers; just criticizing the *status quo*. It is about transforming the image of the outdoors to be a place for all people; transforming the scope and opportunities available within the outdoors beyond the boundaries of the city limits.

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